

DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT

DECLARATION OF AREA OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST AT SLIEVEANORRA AND CROAGHAN, COUNTY ANTRIM. ARTICLE 28 OF THE ENVIRONMENT (NORTHERN IRELAND) ORDER 2002.

The Department of the Environment (the Department), having consulted the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside and being satisfied that the area described and delineated on the attached map (the area) is of special scientific interest by reason of the flora and fauna and accordingly needs to be specially protected, hereby declares the area to be an area of special scientific interest to be known as the 'Slieveanorra and Croaghan Area of Special Scientific Interest'.

This area is of special scientific interest because of its peatland flora and associated fauna. Slieveanorra and Croaghan ASSI is a largely intact blanket bog. The area is characterised by undulating topography and the peatland complex consists of a series of raised bog peat units on deeper peat within an enveloping mantle of blanket bog. It extends from Slieveanorra Mountain north over Black Hill to Croaghan Mountain. Slieveanorra itself is underlain by Palaeogene age basalts (approximately 60 million years old) from the Antrim Lava Group. Moving north west, the geology is composed of Dalradian rocks (545 million year old approx), predominantly metamorphosed mudstones and sandstones of the Southern Highland Group. The continuity of the intact bog has been interrupted in places by roads and adjacent coniferous plantations, resulting in a series of separate compartments within the ASSI. Biological interest relates to the peatland communities and structural features, which are characteristic of largely undisturbed upland habitats. The area includes a well-developed pool system on deep peat, in addition to flat bog plains and adjacent cutover bog. There is also a mosaic of wet and dry upland heaths where the peats are shallower.

The vegetation on the intact bog surface is characterised by Bog-mosses *Sphagnum* spp., ericoid dwarf-shrubs and associated species. The composition and abundance of these depends upon local environmental conditions, particularly the height of the water table. Much of the bog plain is dominated by Heather *Calluna vulgaris*, with Cross-leaved Heath *Erica tetralix*, Hare's-tail Cottongrass *Eriophorum vaginatum*, Crowberry *Empetrum nigrum* and Bilberry *Vaccinium myrtillus* growing over a mixed moss and liverwort mat. In some places the peat surface is wetter and displays a well-developed microtopography, with prominent Red Bog-moss *Sphagnum capillifolium* hummocks supporting Reindeer lichen *Cladonia portentosa*, and Heath Plait-moss *Hypnum jutlandicum* and the liverworts Purple Spoonwort *Pleurozia purpurea* and Bog-moss Flapwort *Odontoschisma sphagni*. Between these hummocks there are flat, waterlogged lawns with locally abundant Bog Asphodel *Narthecium ossifragum*. Other species recorded throughout the intact surface include Papillose Bog-moss *Sphagnum papillosum* and Woolly Fringe-moss *Racomitrium lanuginosum*, which can form large hummocks.

The summit of Slieveanorra and the northern flanks of the mountain are undergoing extensive erosion resulting in excellent examples of hags and gullies. A mosaic of wet and dry heaths occurs on the thin peats that occur in these areas. Most notably an area of Woolly Fringe-moss *Racomitrium lanuginosum* dominated montane heath occurs



around the summit of Slieveanorra, with the scarce Alpine Clubmoss *Diphasiastrum alpinum* and the rare Cowberry *Vaccinium vitis-idaea* also occurring here.

Slieveanorra and Croaghan ASSI incorporates Slieveanorra National Nature Reserve which is comprised of both an area on the summit of Slieveanorra Mountain, which shows the different stages in the formation and erosion and regeneration of peat, and an area of deep peat to the north of Altarichard Road. The later area is a classic example of an upland raised bog, with occasional Austin's Bog-moss *Sphagnum austinii*, a notable hummock forming species. The surface is very wet, and along with the peatland compartment to the north west of the Nature Reserve, supports a well developed complex of large, deep pools containing aquatic Bog-mosses *Sphagnum* spp., particularly Cow-horn Bog-moss *S. denticulatum* with occasional Feathery Bog-moss *S. cuspidatum* around the periphery. Bogbean *Menyanthes trifoliata* is also often found within the pools. The vegetation surrounding the pools is comprised of a luxuriant mat of Bog-mosses *Sphagnum* spp., predominantly Red Bog-moss *S. capillifolium* and Magellanic Bog-moss *S. magellanicum* with both Round-leaved Sundew *Drosera rotundifolia* and Great Sundew *D. anglica*.

The bog provides important habitat for upland birds particularly Merlin *Falco columbarius* and Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus*. Both of these species currently breed in adjoining areas but use the open moorland for foraging. Slieveanorra and Croaghan ASSI contains vegetation dominated by Heather *Calluna vulgaris* and these areas may support nesting Merlin *Falco columbarius* and Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus* in the future. Additional notable breeding species include Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*, Red Grouse *Lagopus lagopus* and Raven *Corvus corax*.

Slieveanorra and Croaghan ASSI also provides an extensive area of undisturbed upland habitat that is very valuable for associated invertebrates, birds and mammals. Common lizard *Lacerta vivipara* has also been recorded on the site.

SCHEDULE

The following operations and activities appear to the Department to be likely to damage the flora and fauna of the area:

1. Any activity or operation which involves the damage or disturbance by any means of the surface and subsurface of the land, including ploughing, rotovating, harrowing, reclamation and extraction of minerals, including rock, sand, gravel and peat.
2. Any change in the present annual pattern and intensity of grazing, including any change in the type of livestock used or in supplementary feeding practice.
3. Mowing or other methods of cutting vegetation.
4. The application of manure, slurry or artificial fertiliser.
5. The application of herbicides, fungicides or other chemicals deployed to kill any form of wild plant, other than plants listed as being noxious in the Noxious Weeds (Northern Ireland) Order 1977.

6. The storage or dumping, spreading or discharge of any material not specified under paragraph 5 above.
7. The destruction, displacement, removal or cutting of any plant, seed or plant remains, other than for plants listed as noxious in the Noxious Weeds (Northern Ireland) Order 1977.
8. The release into the area of any animal (other than in connection with normal grazing practice) or plant. 'Animal' includes birds, mammals, fish, reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates; 'Plant' includes seed, fruit or spore.
9. Burning.
10. Changes in tree or woodland management, including afforestation, planting, clearing, selective felling and coppicing.
11. Construction, removal or disturbance of any permanent or temporary structure including building, engineering or other operations.
12. Alteration of natural or man-made features, the clearance of boulders or large stones and grading of rock faces.
13. Operations or activities, which would affect wetlands (include marsh, fen, bog, rivers, streams and open water), e.g.
 - (i) change in the methods or frequency of routine drainage maintenance;
 - (ii) modification of the structure of any watercourse;
 - (iii) lowering of the water table, permanently or temporarily;
 - (iv) change in the management of bank-side vegetation.
14. The disturbance, killing or taking of any wild animal except where such killing or taking is treated as an exception in Articles 5, 6, 11, 17, 20, 21 and 22 of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985.
15. The following activities undertaken in a manner likely to damage or disturb the wildlife of the area:
 - (i) educational activities;
 - (ii) research activities;
 - (iii) recreational activities;
 - (iv) exercising of animals.
16. Changes in game, waterfowl or fisheries management or fishing or hunting practices.
17. Use of vehicles or craft likely to damage or disturb the wildlife of the area.

FOOTNOTES

- (a) Please note that consent by the Department to any of the operations or activities listed in the Schedule does not constitute planning permission. Where required, planning permission must be applied for in the usual manner to the Department under Part IV of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991.

- (b) Also note that many of the operations and activities listed in the Schedule are capable of being carried out either on a large scale or in a very small way. While it is impossible to define exactly what is large and what is small, the Department would intend to approach each case in a common sense and practical way. It is very unlikely that small scale operations would give rise for concern and if this was the case the Department would normally give consent, particularly if there is a long history of the operation being undertaken in that precise location.

SLIEVEANORRA AND CROAGHAN

Views About Management The Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002 Article 28(2)

A statement of the Department's views about the management of Slieveanorra and Croaghan Area of Special Scientific Interest ("the ASSI")

This statement represents the views of the Department about the management of the ASSI for nature conservation. This statement sets out, in principle, our views on how the area's special conservation interest can be conserved and enhanced. The Department has a duty to notify the owners and occupiers of the ASSI of its views about the management of the land.

Not all of the management principles will be equally appropriate to all parts of the ASSI and there may be other management activities, additional to our current views, which can be beneficial to the conservation and enhancement of the features of interest. It is also very important to recognise that management may need to change with time.

The management views set out below do not constitute consent for any operation or activity. The written consent of the Department is still required before carrying out any operation or activity likely to damage the features of special interest (see the schedule on pages 2 and 3 for a list of these operations and activities). The Department welcomes consultation with owners, occupiers and users of the ASSI to ensure that the management of this area maintains and enhances the features of interest, and to ensure that all necessary prior consents are obtained.

MANAGEMENT PRINCIPLES

Blanket Bog

Blanket bog is a unique habitat for wildlife. The Department would encourage the maintenance and enhancement of the bog through the conservation of its associated native plants and animals.

Bogs depend on rainwater and maintaining a high water table is vital to the "health" of the bog. In addition, the peat soils and many of the species that grow there are very sensitive to physical disturbance.

Specific objectives include:

Ensure that the blanket bog is not burnt in order to prevent the loss of more specialised plants and animals, and to avoid damage to peat soils which could lead to erosion.

Where appropriate, prevent the loss of light-demanding peatland species through the control of scrub and trees.

Where the surface is not too wet, blanket bogs can sustain very light levels of grazing by sheep. The Department would encourage a regime that avoids overgrazing or poaching.

Where the habitat has been subjected to heavy grazing, the Department would encourage a reduction in stocking density to allow the bog to recover.

Montane Heath

Montane heath is an important habitat for wildlife. In Northern Ireland it is only found in a few of the highest, most exposed upland areas. The vegetation usually consists of low-growing, wind-clipped dwarf-shrubs, such as Heather, growing with mosses, lichens and sedges. The Department would encourage the maintenance and enhancement of the heath through the conservation of its associated native plants and animals. These include a number of rare plants.

Due to the effects of high altitude and harsh climate, montane heath is very slow growing and requires little active management. However, it is also slow to recover from disturbance and is therefore highly susceptible to damage through grazing and trampling.

Montane heath can generally sustain light summer grazing by sheep with stock being removed during the winter.

Montane heath is vulnerable to trampling through recreational use. The effects are usually localised but visitor pressure may require careful management through, for example, the appropriate placement and maintenance of footpaths.

Specific objectives include:

Montane heath can sustain light summer grazing by sheep. Where the habitat has been subject to light summer grazing, the Department would encourage the continuation of this practice.

The Department would encourage sensitive recreational management, for example, through careful routing of footpaths and information panels.

Whilst recognizing the need for vehicular access to the masts on the summit of Slieveanorra, the Department would encourage the use of existing tracks to avoid damaging the montane heath.

The use of burning to manage montane heath is damaging and should be avoided.

Management principles applicable to all habitats throughout the site

The Department would encourage all activities associated with site maintenance, management, access and recreation to be undertaken in a sensitive manner that ensures disturbance to the site and its wildlife is minimized.

Discourage non-native species, especially those that tend to spread at the expense of native wildlife.

Where appropriate, encourage the blocking of drains to prevent wet heath and bog from drying out.

Maintain the diversity and quality of habitats associated with the bog, such as woodland, scrub, heath and grassland, through sensitive management. These adjoining habitats are often very important for wildlife.

Breeding Hen Harrier and Merlin

The Slievanorra and Croaghan ASSI provides foraging habitat for important numbers of breeding Hen Harrier and Merlin. These are among the UK's rarest birds of prey. Numbers of both species have declined in Great Britain and much of Ireland as a result of habitat loss and persecution.

Hen Harriers and Merlins prey mainly on small birds such as Meadow Pipit and Skylark and breeding pairs may range over an area of up to 20km² to obtain sufficient food to rear chicks. Most foraging is carried out over heather moorland or unimproved grassland. The nests of Hen Harriers may be located in deep heather within the ASSI but a range of habitats associated with adjoining forestry areas are also used. Merlins will also nest on the ground among deep heather but most currently utilise abandoned crows' nests on the edge of forestry plantations and use the ASSI principally for foraging. Breeding Hen Harrier and Merlin are very susceptible to disturbance around the nest. In winter several Hen Harriers may roost together at traditional sites in tall heather or forest.

The Department would encourage the maintenance or enhancement of peatland habitats used by Hen Harrier and Merlin for breeding and foraging.

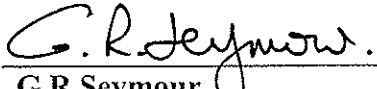
Specific objectives include:

Peatland habitats, including blanket bog together with dry and wet heath, should be managed to produce a diverse vegetation structure, including areas of tall heather for nest sites, and a high density of prey species. Overgrazing and excessive burning will be detrimental.

Areas of unimproved grassland should be maintained as important habitat for Meadow Pipit and Skylark – the two commonest prey species for both Hen Harrier and Merlin.

Breeding Hen Harrier and Merlin are very vulnerable to disturbance within the general area of the nest. The Department would encourage actions that minimise disturbance to both these species when breeding.

Sealed with the Official Seal of the
Department of the Environment
hereunto affixed is authenticated
by


G R Seymour
Senior Officer of the
Department of the Environment

Dated the 11th of MARCH 2009